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ABSTRACT

Readers possess vast amounts of knowledge gained from their prior experiences and exposures. The more they are helped to use that knowledge for connecting new ideas to known subjects as they read, the better their comprehension will be. Discussions before reading have been a traditional way to activate students' schema for stories, but a new method that integrates technology into the curriculum in the form of CDs prepared by children bears examination. Such CDs are an innovative way to activate readers' schema. The process of making the CDs enhances the use of reading and writing together to construct meaning while at the same time modeling the metacognition skills so important to success in reading. The CD contains information about children's books in sections on main character, vocabulary, problem, and clues which set the purpose for reading. The CD was produced with a group of third-grade students, and the objective for the students was to decide the background information that would be needed by other readers to successfully understand the story. A specific CD for the book "Cat Walk" (Mary Stolz) illustrates the process. The entire process, from the first readers to the end users, helps to place importance on thinking about what knowledge and experiences are needed to understand stories at an enhanced level and models the use of prior knowledge to enhance meaning. (Contains an "extension text set" bibliography for use with "Cat Walk," 7 references, and illustrations.) (NKA)

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IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES USING STUDENT PRODUCED CD'S COMBINED WITH MORE TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES

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Enhancing reading comprehension has always been a challenge. In the past, comprehension was usually taught through a series of lessons on separate skills in isolation from the act of reading, by the asking of literal questions, using workbook pages, or checking word fluency through oral round robin reading. Research now advocates that a reader's background knowledge and prior experiences are crucial to understanding and using print. If the reader lacks background experiences and a rich knowledge of language, it is difficult for them to comprehend the print they read. Being able to understand an author's message, and then bridging from that print into one's own world, is necessary to make the connections that achieve comprehension.

Research has shown that data collected from all the experiences an individual receives are stored in the brain. The brain integrates new experiences by retrieving stored knowledge and connecting it with recently gained information to form other patterns. The term schema theory is used to define this process. It is the system used by the brain to connect the knowledge possessed from all memories, events, and experiences to form new networks. When an individual reads, they connect information from the printed page to the knowledge already stored in their schemata and build meaning by combining or recombining the old and new information together. "Comprehension is a matter of activating or constructing a schema that provides a coherent explanation of objects and events mentioned in discourse. The click of comprehension occurs only when the reader evolves a schema that explains the whole message" (Anderson, 1984, p. 247).

Good readers continually seek associations between their own knowledge and new information the author is giving them. When a reader is lacking prior knowledge, their comprehension is decreased. However, just "having prior knowledge is not

enough to improve comprehension: the knowledge must be activated" (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992, p.155).

Readers possess vast amounts of knowledge gained from their prior experiences and exposures. The more they are helped to use that knowledge for connecting new ideas to known subjects as they read, the better their comprehension will be. "New information is learned and remembered best when it is integrated with relevant prior knowledge, or existing schemata" (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992, p.155). To effectively activate a reader's schemata prior to reading, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend that readers are helped if they can "use what they know to get to what they do not yet know[;] talk about and respond to what they read[;] and make connections between texts they have read and between their own world knowledge and reading." (p. 9).

Discussions before reading have been a traditional way to activate student's schema for stories. Let us examine a new method that integrates technology into the curriculum in the form of CD's prepared by children. Student prepared CD's are an innovative way to activate reader's schemata. Having students create CD's for other readers enables two groups in organizing their schemata as well as gaining new reading skills. The process of making the CD's enhances the use of reading and writing together to construct meaning while at the same time modeling the metacognition skills so important to success in reading.

The CD contains information about children's books in sections on main character, vocabulary, problem, and clues which set the purpose for reading. The CD was produced with a group of third grade students. Students chose stories from a selection of time honored favorite books. They had been taught to use story grammar for discussing books and decided to use the portions of characters, setting, problem, actions, and goals or outcome as the areas to focus on for the activation of future reader's prior knowledge. Lengthy discussions about the characters in the story using strategies, I will explain later, and questions designed to help seek the meaning of the author lead to the final decisions.

The objective for the students was to decide the background information that would be needed by other readers to successfully understand the story. Information

generated from these discussions led to the decisions about pictures they felt would best activate other's schemata before reading. The students drew illustrations or found clip art, wrote scripts, and built their CD using the computer program Power Point.

The CD's achieved two purposes. One was increasing the first readers' own knowledge of story structure and another was to determine what would help other readers enjoy and understand the story better. It became important for the initial readers to determine what they believed to be significant items, generate their own questions to help comprehension, and summarize information in their own words. This allowed these readers to problem solve by identifying the main concepts, inferring ideas, and the elaboration of text information that increases comprehension. They were making use of their metacognition to demonstrate that they understood the story.

The CD's were then used by other readers as another way to access prior knowledge and to activate or organize their schema before reading the books. This allowed readers, who may not have the needed schemata, the valuable experience of receiving the background knowledge before reading. The CD's also modeled the use of establishing a purpose before reading by asking one's self questions.

Braunger and Lewis (1998) list factors which have been important in helping readers that have difficulty. They are:

- Access and opportunity to a wide variety of reading material.
- Motivating readers to want to read and to want to engage in reading.
- Providing time to really read in real texts.
- Supportive instruction in the "how-tos" of reading.
- Self-esteem and confidence, which play integral roles in successful reading development.
- High expectation for success in a supported environment (p. 27).

The use of the CD's have been a vehicle to facilitate the achievement of these needed attributes. Although the CD's were not produced just for struggling readers, they did strengthen the critical element of prior experience and construction of comprehension through the use of new literacy experiences.

Another benefit of the CD's has been more additions of student made material to the classroom library. The student "authors" took pride in their product as an important part of the classroom and other students enjoyed them because they were student produced. The CD's generated enthusiasm about reading books other readers recommended. They also helped to create more opportunities for social interaction within the classroom by developing the knowledge of what one does as a good reader (Braunger & Lewis,1998)

Readers' comprehension is greatly improved when postreading activities help them recall the content, extend the text, or bridge the information from the text into their own world (Dowhower, 1999). Activities that tie together the story with other information and model how to determine answers to questions improve readers' comprehension and further their growth to becoming independent readers.

Let us look at a specific CD. The book used for this CD was *Cat Walk* by Mary Stolz. The pattern in this book lends itself to using a cycle graph to map the various homes the cat visited during the story. The reader names each home by writing them around a circle in the order visited. Next they write a reason why he left each home. This can be expanded to listing the characteristics of the different owners. The discussions help to determine what makes a good pet owner and/or home.

Three other books about homeless cats are *No Cats Allowed* by Lois Simmie, *Leo the Magnificent* by Ann M. Martin, and *Catwings* by Ursula LeGuin. These books describe different experiences of cats trying to find homes than the cat in *Cat Walk*. Venn diagrams would be an excellent way to graphically look at the similarities and differences in the cats' experiences.

Yet another way to make connections would be through the use of character comparisons. Adding the book *Six-Dinner Sid* by Inga Moore gives the student five books about cats that travel for different reasons. A character description or motivation is written for each different cat on a character map. The readers list the differences in the cats on the organizer and then discuss them together. This activity enhances understanding of character actions and bridges to making comparisons of motives.

Text sets are an excellent way to expand student's knowledge base. Text sets are a collection of eight to fifteen books around a similar topic but in a variety of genre. I have included a text set on the theme of cats at the end of this article. The books can be read by different children or all the students can read each of the books. The information gained from the variety of books around the same theme or concept expands student's knowledge and, again, enlarges their schemata. This is enhanced even more when there are discussions and strategy activities to help them make connections.

Through the use of traditional reading activities, but combining technology in the form of student produced CD's, using graphic organizers, and text sets teachers increase the likelihood of student's expanding their background knowledge and increasing comprehension. By using other student's personal experiences, drawings, and voices in the CD's, high interest is generated for the act of reading. The entire process, from the first readers to the end users, helps to place importance on thinking about what knowledge and experiences are needed to understand stories at an enhanced level and models the use of prior knowledge to enhance meaning.

Extension text set bibliography for use with:

Stolz, Mary. (1963). *Cat Walk*. New York: Harper & Row.

Fantasy

Ga'g, Wanda. (1928). *Millions of Cats*. New York: Coward-McCann.

LeGuin, Ursula K. (1988). *Catwings*. New York: Scholastic.

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Waber, Bernard. (1963). *Rich Cat, poor Cat*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Realistic Fiction

Baker, Leslie. (1987). *The Third Story Cat*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Burnford, Shelia. (1960). *The Incredible Journey*. New York: Bantam Books.

Eisler, Colin. (1988). *Cats Know Best*. New York: Dial Books.

Farjeon, Eleanor. (1996). *Cats Sleep Anywhere*. New York: Harper Collins.

Fox, Paula. (1984). *One Eyed Cat*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Martin, Ann M. (1996). *Leo the Magnificent*. New York: Scholastic.

Moore, Inga. (1991). *Six Dinner Sid*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Simmie, Lois. (1995). *No Cats Allowed*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Poetry

de Regniers, Beatrice Schenk. (1985). *This Big Cat and Other Cats I've Known.* New York: Crown Publishers, Inc.

Leman, Martin. (1990). *Little Kitten Book.* London: William Clowes Limited.

Informational

Burton, Jane. *Ginger the Kitten: How Your Pet Grows.* (1988). New York: Random House.

Hawksley, Gerald & Julie. (1989). *Cats: A Child's Guide To Caring For Pets.* New York: Victoria House Publishing.

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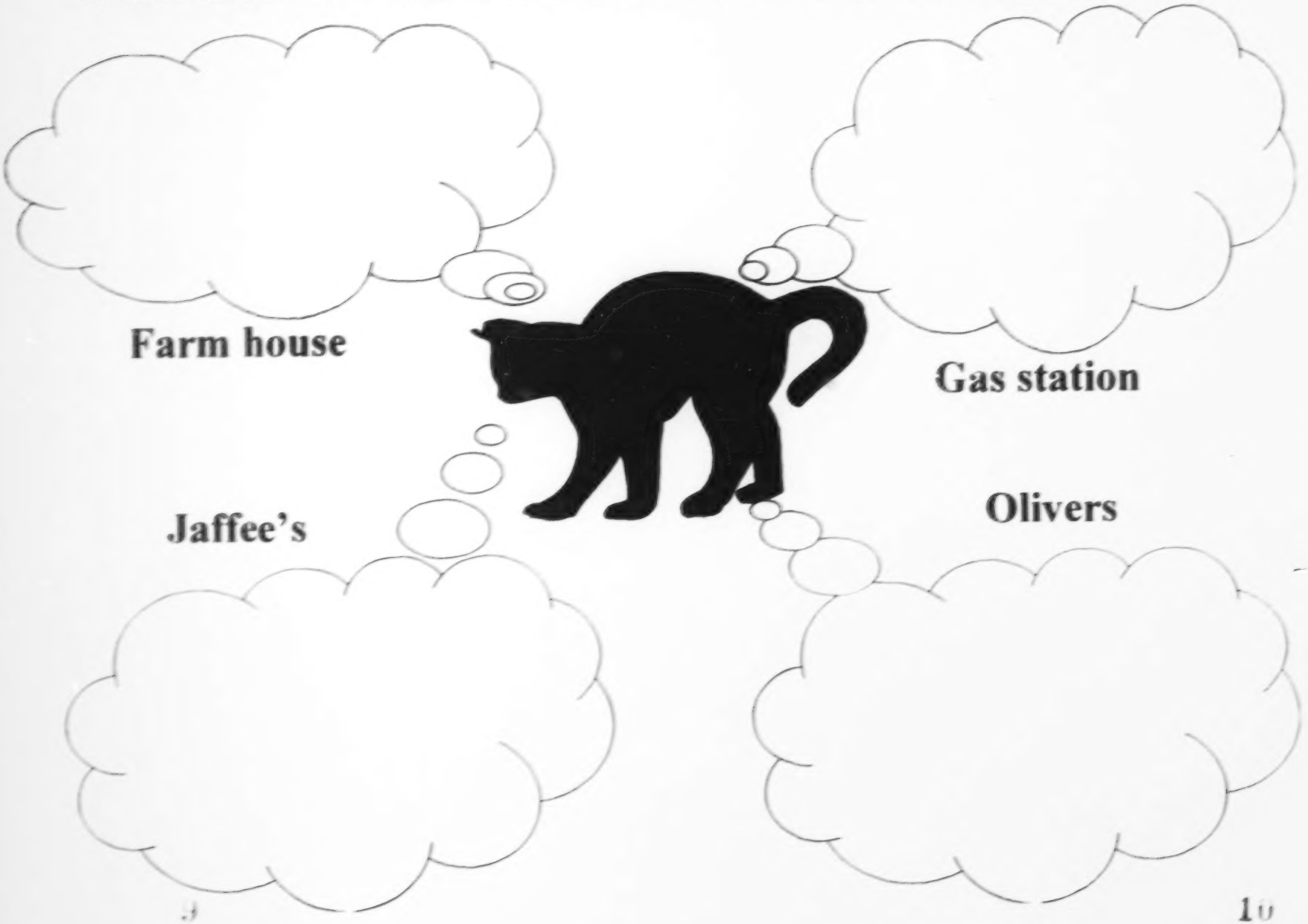
Pearson, P. D., Roehler, L. R., Dole, J. A., & Duffy, G. G. (1992). Developing expertise in reading comprehension. In Samuels, S. J. & Farstrup, A. E. What research has to say about reading instruction (2nd ed.) Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

What does he think when he is at each of these houses?



Describing characters